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# Exploring the Viability of Establishing a Children's Grief Camp in South Africa

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Exploring the Viability of Establishing a Children's Grief Camp in South Africa

Honor's Research Project

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### Abstract

The death of a loved one is an inevitable and unavoidable phase of life that everyone must experience. A variety of thoughts and feelings follow the death a close friend or relative. It is crucial to address the thoughts and feelings associated with the death so that individuals can grieve in a healthy manner. Those living in South Africa are most likely going to experience the death of a loved one since South Africa has such a high mortality rate. Through a qualitative study, this paper explores the death system and culture in South Africa. In addition, the organizations and support for those who experience a loss in the United States are explored. In a cross-cultural examination, the American version of a grief camp is examined to address the grief needs of South Africa. A grief camp provides grief support for children in a non-traditional group setting, allowing children to be themselves and share about the loss of their loved one. It has been found that a grief camp is a viable option to assist in the process of grieving in South Africa.

**Background: Grief and Mourning**

Typically, Americans use euphemisms when talking about death and loss. “Robert passed away yesterday,” “Katie went up to heaven,” “Jimmy’s time was up,” “Tiffany is no longer here,” “Billy passed away.” However one says the words, they all mean the same thing; someone who was loved has died and is no longer here on earth. Death is always a difficult experience to process, understand, and accept. Nobody wants to hear those words, especially when it is in reference to someone whom they loved and cared for. However, death is an integral part of life, and everyone will experience the death of a loved one at some point in their life.

Given that death and loss are unavoidable, how do people cope when they lose a loved one? Some people talk about their loved one at every chance they get, while others find it difficult to mention the name of their loved one. Some people cry for several days in a row, while others put a smile on their face to cover up how they are really feeling inside. Some create memorials and put up pictures of their loved one, while others get rid of everything that reminds them of their loved one as soon as possible. However one reacts to the death of a loved one, they are all experiencing grief.

Grief is the natural, human response to a significant loss (Corr, Nabe, & Cabe, 2013). It is expressed in a variety of emotions, behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. Grollman (1993), a renowned author and lecturer on death and bereavement, stated that “Grief is not a disorder, a disease or a sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical, and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The cure for grief is to grieve”.

The process of working through one’s grief is often referred to as *mourning* (Corr & Corr, 2015). Worden (2001) refers to the processes of mourning as tasks that an individual must address in order to heal from one’s loss. These tasks include accepting the reality of the loss,

working through the pain, adjusting to a new environment without the deceased, and reinvesting one's energy in new directions. Just as there are many ways to respond to the death of a loved one, people find that there are many avenues through which to process their loss.

### **Children's Grief**

One indisputable fact is that adults and children often have different ways of grieving and mourning. Typically, a few days after a death has occurred, a funeral or some type of memorial service is held to celebrate the life of the loved one. Adults understand the purpose of this and often help plan the service. However, children often do not understand the principle and closure associated with the service. They attend because they were told to do so, not knowing what to do with their feelings or how to act. Most children have limited ability to verbalize their feelings and limited capacity to tolerate the pain generated when recognizing the loss (Webb, 2010). This prohibits them from talking about their loved one and fully feeling and understanding the pain associated with a loss. Without the ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings in relation to the loss of their loved one, children may never fully grieve or may find that their grieving continues and interacts with various points in their development into adulthood, potentially having long-term effects (Corr et al., 2013). Since children are not well-equipped to know how to talk about the death of their loved one or know what to say to someone who has experienced a loss, they are unaware that their peers may have experienced a loss similar to them. Children have a fear of being different than others, which gives them another reason to not talk about their loved one (Webb, 2010). Further as children tend to grieve differently than do adults (e.g., with greater physical complaints, less need and/or ability to verbalize their grief, behavioral changes related to school and home-life, etc.), they require different interventions and theories appropriate for children who have experienced a loss. An

example of this is play therapy, which helps children, who do not feel comfortable directly talking about their thoughts and feelings, through their grieving process by allowing them to display them through activities and play (Webb, 2010).

### **Grief Camps for Children Mourning a Loss**

One successful model of assisting grieving children has been to adopt a camp-style approach. The American Camp Association (ACA), the national accrediting organization for youth camps, recognizes that camping contributes to child development by supporting confidence, teamwork, and self-esteem (ACA, 2015). The environment of camp allows children to personally grow, as they learn more about themselves and interact with their peers. Cohen (2014), a licensed clinical social worker who practices in New York, described the social and emotional long-term benefits of attending a summer camp. In an article written for the NYC Camp Guide 2014, he discussed that camps provide an opportunity to experience recreation and creativity in a structured environment. In turn, campers experience an improved social intelligence, increased resilience, the opportunity to experience a broad range of emotions in a short time period, and the chance to explore who they are.

During a typical grief camp, children monitor not only their own thoughts and feelings, but also how they react to those feelings and interact with others. Camp has often been described as a “fishbowl,” “bubble,” or “escape from reality.” The environment of camp allows an individual to take a break from his or her everyday responsibilities and life. Camp gives children an opportunity to focus on themselves and improve their personal qualities, such as increased confidence or overcoming a fear. This summer camp model has been effective when working with children and can be directly applied to helping grieving children cope and heal from their losses (Cohen, 2014). The premise is that a connection between the thoughts and feelings of

children who have experienced a loss and the positive changes that have been seen in children who have attended a summer camp is very strong.

According to Peter Hanlon (2015), a clinical therapist and bereavement specialist with 37 years of experience working in grief and loss in Ireland, Therapeutic Recreation (TR) is an effective intervention that is unintentionally utilized at many summer camps, and is especially beneficial at grief camps. TR is the “provision of treatment services and the provision of recreation services to person with illness or disabling conditions” (Dixon, n.d. p. 1). It combines treatment and recreation in an effort to help those who are not functioning at their fullest ability. This type of recreation attempts to “restore, remediate, or rehabilitate” those who partake in it (Hanlon, 2015, p. 7). Professionals who utilize TR when working with clients, help individuals restore their lives to the adjustments created by the death of their loved one. A grief camp offers children an escape from reality, give them the opportunity to express their grief from the death of a loved one in an environment in which personal growth, resiliency, and self-exploration are supported.

Mosher, an advocate for the summer camp model for grieving children, stated that camps are “beneficial because the experience helps to improve aggression and psychosocial functioning, and gives an opportunity to channel social anxiety for children with socialization and relationship dysfunction associated with grief” (Camp Kita, n.d.). Avoiding the feelings that develop due to the loss of a loved one may have long-term impact on a child. Grief camps allow children to express and share their unfamiliar feelings in a safe environment. They are also given the opportunity to hear the feelings that other people are experiencing, giving them comfort in knowing that they are not alone in feeling that way. By expressing their feelings at camp,

children are able to process through them, so as to lessen the potential detrimental long-term consequences of avoiding one's grief.

There are a variety of children's grief camp models that have been successful in the United States (Foundation for Grieving Children, n.d.). Camps differ in relation to ages served, location, losses experienced, and duration of the camp itself. Examples of effective grief camps established in the United States include Comfort Zone Camp, Camp Kita, Camp Love, Tamarack Grief Resource Center, Camp Erin, and Camp Rainbow.

Comfort Zone Camp (CZC) provides free services all throughout the year. It was established in 1998 in an effort to "provide a caring community and safe haven in which children, who are grieving the loss of a parent, sibling, or primary caregiver, are heard, understood, and taught healthy ways to process their grief" (Comfort Zone Camp, 2012). CZC provides a safe environment for children who have had their lives turned upside down to talk about their grief. Allison White Twente (Comfort Zone Camp, 2012), a family psychologist and advocate for CZC, stated that she has "seen kids grow and learn more in two and a half days at camp than many months of individual therapy."

Another positive example of a children's grief camp is Camp Erin. Founded in Washington in 2002, Camp Erin has grown to 43 different locations and has served a total of 12,649 campers (The Moyer Foundation, n.d.). Children who attend Camp Erin find comfort in the fact that their grieving peers have experienced similar feelings and thoughts as themselves. In an effort to establish positive coping skills and support systems, children gain tools, resources, memories, and friendships that can last a lifetime.

Another noteworthy entity is the Tamarack Grieve Resource Center, which provides support all year round to grieving children and adults in Montana. The employees at Tamarack



believe that “during times of loss, individuals can benefit from connections with understanding others as they reconstruct their lives” (Tamarack Grief Resource Center, n.d.). Tamarack partners with already established organizations, such as Hospice, and offer services through grief camps and retreats.

In addition to grief camps in the United States, there are also grief camps located all around the world. Barretstown, located in Ireland, describes itself as “a serious fun camp” (Barretstown, n.d.). Barretstown offers grief camps for families who have had a child die from a serious illness. They seek to provide support by bringing together families who have experienced a similar loss and provide them with skills and resources for their future.

### **Purpose of the Current Research Paper**

While empirical research on the efficacy of children’s grief camps may not be extensive at this point in time, there is enough support to suggest that some positive effect can be seen from these types of supports. Further, evidence suggests that the grief camp model could be extended to different countries, with appropriate modification in line with each country’s death systems (Hanlon, 2015). It is important to create a grief camp in South Africa because there is such a high mortality rate and little support available. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore the possibility of establishing a grief camp for children in South Africa.

### **Death In South Africa**

According to the Central Intelligence Agency (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.), South Africa has the highest death mortality rate in the entire world, with 17.49 deaths occurring for every 1,000 people in 2014. These deaths are caused by a variety of diseases, natural causes, and more, but one disease that has taken the lives of a large number of South Africans is AIDS. As estimated by UNAIDS, 270,000 people from Africa died due to AIDS in 2011 (AVERT, n.d.).

Those who die from AIDS often leave several loved ones at home, who then have to go on living alone. Death due to AIDS in South Africa leaves many children without a parent to grow up with, nurture them, teach them, and provide daily necessities. According to The Positive Change Project, South Africa has the second highest AIDS population in Africa, and is currently home to 1,900,000 AIDS orphans (Positive Change Project, n.d.). To put this into perspective, this is more than the population of the state of West Virginia in 2012 was 1,855,413 people (West Virginia, n.d.). These children are the second-tier victims of AIDS, so to speak, and are living without their parents, trying to survive on their own. Children who have lost their parents due to AIDS often experience poverty, poor nutrition, lack of education, and increased vulnerability. These children also gain increased responsibilities, such as earning the income for their family, producing food, and caring for other family members, which are usually provided by parents or are expectations of children at a much later age in life. Not only are these children dealing with the significant loss of a parent, but they are also being prematurely forced into an adult life of struggle. They do not have adequate time to grieve and mourn the loss of their parents when they have other life priorities and responsibilities to tend to. Children then face the tremendous burden of performing their daily responsibilities while also carrying the grief of their lost loved one.

South Africa has recognized this social problem and developed programs that address the AIDS pandemic. Although a positive effort, the majority of these are too limited in scope. One such program is Howick Hospice, where a team of a hospice nurse, social worker, and 12 community care workers provides palliative care for individuals who are near the end of their life. It serves over 350 adults and children, who have HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis, and supports children through its outreach program, but the needs are much greater than services currently offered can effectively meet (Hospice of Siouland, n.d.). Unfortunately, the net effect is that

meeting children's survival needs takes precedence over helping them grieve and mourn the loss of their loved ones.

One program that does provide grief counseling specific to children is Khululeka Grief Support. Located in Cape Town, this organization was originally founded in 2005 to provide support for orphaned children due to HIV. Khulueka has recognized the issues of AIDS in South Africa and the need to provide support for bereaved children and youth. By working with these orphans, founders of the program realized that most of the children did not have the opportunity to receive any form of grief counseling. If the children never processed their grief, anger and insecurity often appeared and, in many cases, led to anti-social behavior such as criminal activity, drug abuse, and teenage pregnancy (Collingwood, 2013). Khululeka acknowledges that orphaned children are vulnerable; their mission is to provide support, resources, and tools for those individuals who have experienced a loss.

According to D. Diedricks, the Director of Khululeka Grief Support (personal communication, February 25, 2015), death from AIDS is not nearly as big a problem for the local population as it was a few years ago when Khululeka was originally founded. New and improved medications have been introduced, which, while they do not cure people with HIV, do prevent their developing full AIDS. As a result, fewer people are dying from AIDS and, thus, there are fewer children who become orphaned due to AIDS.

Although AIDS has become more controlled, death and grief are still very prevalent in South Africa. According to South African Medical Research Council (2015), there were 458,933 registered deaths in South African in 2013. Ninety% of these deaths were caused in relation to health problems and diseases within the body, such as infectious disease and metabolic disorders. The remaining 10% of deaths were caused by accidents and other external causes, including

intentional self-harm and transportation accidents. It is important to keep in mind that not all deaths and causes are reported, and, thus, there are most likely more deaths and causes than what is being published. Especially in a diverse country such as South Africa, one might not know how to report or they have other crucial priorities.

### **South Africa's Death System**

According to Kastenbaum (1998), a society's *death system* refers to the customs, rituals, beliefs, attitudes, and values it has as related to death and dying. In South Africa's death system, grief is dependent on many factors, particularly gender and culture (Kotze, Els, & Rajuli-Masilo 2012). Throughout the past 200 years, mourning customs in South Africa have evolved, based on traditional practices from apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. Kotze, Els, and Rajuli-Masilo (2012) explored gender differences in relation to grief expressions and experiences among the African cultures of Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana, and Southern and North Sotho. Some common traditions include "a sitting," *ukuzila*, sharing of possessions with extended family, cleansing rituals, issues related to dress and hair, and "after tears parties". *Ubuntu* is an African philosophy that describes caring solidarity, characteristically in relation to death. By caring for and respecting those who had died, South Africans have the opportunity to practice *Ubuntu*, as well as enacting resistance. Kotze et al. stated, "Women and children mourn and men carry on" (p. 4). They also asserted that grieving can sometimes be viewed as a "luxury" and it is sometimes pushed aside while people try to continue on with their life and meet basic survival needs.

Appel and Papaikonomou (2013) explored death and bereavement from different cultures in South Africa. They found that most indigenous South Africans believe that death is not really the end of one's life, but rather a physical separation from the spiritual world. Some South

Africans view death as a ceremonial process, viewing death ceremonies and rituals as “valuable, therapeutic, and emotionally and spiritually beneficial” (Appel & Papaikonomou, 2013, p. 455). To some South Africans, the funeral may be all they need to process through their grief and accept the loss of their loved one. However, only three cultures were examined and thus do not represent all of the cultures and people of South Africa.

Drenth, Herbst, and Strydom (2013) state that for South Africans, experiencing a loss can result in significant impact on both social functioning and vulnerability. The resulting impaired social functioning can negatively impact all aspects of daily living, including interactions with other people and groups. The impacted areas include, but are not limited to, work, school, family, friends, organizations, faith/religion, hobbies, thoughts, and feelings. In addition to these negative effects, individuals are at risk for greater vulnerability and may not be able to function at their fullest capacity.

L. Morsches (personal communication, November 2, 2014), a South African native who has lived in the U.S. for over 20 years and whose brother recently died in South Africa, reported that when a loss occurs, the emphasis is put on the importance of family. Morsches described a typical South African reaction as “another stage we go through.” It is common that family members come together, provide support for each other, and slaughter an animal (e.g., cow) as a ritual. Given such a high overall mortality rate in South Africa, it is not surprising that the people of South Africa view it as a process of life. However, this does not mean that they know what to do with their feelings in regard to the loss, or if they even deal with them at all (L. Morsches, personal communication, November 2, 2014).

M. Papaikonomou (personal communication, November 7, 2014), a psychology professor at the University of South Africa, discussed the different services for urban and rural cultures in

South Africa. The few grief counseling services that are already offered are mostly based in urban areas, whereas the people living in the rural areas rely on traditions, such as family, spiritual healers, and *sangomas*, a traditional healer. Religion also plays a large role in the grief of South Africans living in both urban and rural areas.

Death is an inevitable and frequent tragedy that the majority of people in South Africa will experience throughout their lifetime. Although a few cultures have no problem of acknowledging grief, the majority of cultures in South Africa deny it, prohibiting those affected by the loss from having the opportunity to properly grieve. Death is often seen as taboo, inhibiting people to work through their thoughts and feelings related to the loss. This is especially evident for children, who lack an outlet to talk about the loss of their loved one and how it has impacted their life. In a survey taken by children who attended a support group through Khululeka, the majority of the children shared that they did not talk about the death of a loved one outside of the group (Collingwood, 2013). Without the support group, children would not have anyone to talk to or an outlet to share their thoughts and feelings in relation to the death of their loved ones.

### **Creating a Grief Camp for Children in South Africa**

The culture of South Africa highly values community and working with other people. Therefore, South Africans would benefit more from camps which emphasize grieving within the group, rather than individual level. A grief camp for children would be an effective way to incorporate grief support in a group setting. Additionally, in South Africa, it is common for children to be raised by someone other than their biological parents (D. Diedricks, personal conversation, February 25, 2015). Although some children are reared solely by their mothers, a significant number are often reared by grandparents, other relatives, or by people that they have

no relation to at all. Given both the large number of orphans in South Africa as well as the mix of leading causes of death, providing a grief camp for children who have had a primary caregiver would be a viable and needed option.

A big step toward the creation of a grief camp for children would involve the process of determining who would run and work at the camp. The success of Khululeka Grief Support owes credit to utilizing staff who are predominantly from South Africa, particularly with individuals who speak the language (D. Diedricks, personal conversation, February 25, 2015). Also, recruitment of campers might be most successful if done in conjunction with local schools. Most school programs take their students to a camp as an extracurricular activity so that children, families, and educators are already familiar with the concept.

### **Proposed Model of Grief Camp**

Based on the preceding review of the literature, a grief camp could be beneficial in helping the children of South Africa mourn and memorialize the life of their deceased loved one. Since this is a new idea and South Africans are not used to outwardly expressing their grief, the camp would be most successful by beginning with a week-long day camp. By offering a day camp, children are not spending a long period away from home, allowing them to still partake in their daily responsibilities at home. The staff and advocates of the grief camp would first need to establish a relationship with schools in South Africa that have students in need of grief support. The schools could serve as an advocate and educate their students and families about the grief camp, as well as host the camp after school hours are over. Holding the camp at the school would be effective because children are already familiar with the area and would feel more comfortable in a potentially uncomfortable setting. It would also lessen the financial burden of transportation

and travel time that could take away from time that could be utilized elsewhere, thereby freeing more resources of each (i.e., time and budget) for other activities.

The camp will be held Monday-Friday from 3:00pm-7:15pm. Since the children would be coming straight from a long day at school, every day will begin with a snack and time to relax. In an attempt to receive more support and participation in the camp, a snack and dinner will be provided every day for the campers, and the camper's family will be also invited to join the group for dinner every night. As previously mentioned, South Africans often do not have time to grieve because they are more concentrated on daily responsibilities and survival. Picking up their child from camp may serve as an inconvenience for them, so providing dinner may save them time of cooking for their family, as well as possibly receiving a nurturing meal that they may otherwise not receive. As seen in Figure 1, every day of camp is similar, consisting of a snack, icebreaker/team building activity, grief activity, recreational activity, and dinner. The last day looks a little different, as the family is invited to come earlier to attend dinner and the memorial ceremony. The memorial ceremony serves as a way to end the week, and allows the campers to celebrate the life of their loved one with their family members and newfound support through the group.

It would be ideal to try a week long afterschool grief camp at several schools throughout South Africa. After establishing relationships and building rapport throughout the South African community, the camps may expand to more rural areas and possibly try out overnight camps. There is an evident need for grief support in rural areas, but it is hard to provide because, as mentioned previously, children may be most concentrated on daily survival. An overnight camp would allow children to be fully emerged into the camp experience because they do not go home in between the sessions and activities.



The goal of the camp is to provide the children with a safe and trusted environment to express their grief that they may normally hold inside of them or not address at all. Grief camps grant children an opportunity to address their own needs and care for themselves. Camp allows children to feel important and to completely be themselves. While at camp, the children may learn things that they never knew about themselves, as well as get to know their peers on a whole new level (Hanlon, 2015).

Funding and staffing play two key roles in the implementation of the grief camp. The biggest financial concerns are the cost for the location of the camp, payment of staff, and the purchase of food and other materials. Several grants would be written in an attempt to receive outside funding and support. Partnering with an organization that exists outside of the country or scope of work is a potential way to assist in meeting funding and staffing needs. Organizations within the United States, such as Hospice of the Western Reserve, have partnerships with organizations that exist in South Africa. This would be a great way to receive funding and support, as well as outside knowledge and recognition. Partnering with a school, and even possibly a church and religious organization could potentially assist with the funding and staffing of the camp. Establishing relationships and building connections with native South Africans and professionals throughout the community is crucial in creating a successful grief camp. Meeting with and preparing for the camp with South Africans who already work in the area of grief and/or children, such as social workers or teachers, would be a huge step in creating the camps as best fit for the children who are grieving in South Africa.

In addition to providing grief support, tools, and resources, typical camp activities, similar to Recreational Therapy, would be offered to the children. These activities include team building activities, involvement of nature, physical activity, crafts, challenge courses, and more.

Through these activities, children are able to experience new opportunities, as well as explore their grief in a non-traditional setting. Oftentimes, the loss of a loved one brings with it financial burdens that prohibit families from being able to provide their children with opportunities, that may otherwise be taken for granted. By offering their activities, the children will be provided with fun and creative activities that give the children an opportunity to experience joy during a time of their lives that otherwise feels torn apart.

The thorough implementation of the last day of camp is imperative to help the children move forward in their grief as camp ends. It is important to allow the campers adequate time to process what they have learned and discussed in the past week. It is also essential to talk about termination and how they feel about no longer being at camp and how they will utilize the skills, resources, and support they have gained. It would also be beneficial to have a staff member talk to the caretakers of the children, so they are aware of what the children experienced, how they may have been affected, and what they can do to continue to provide support for the children. The closing ceremony serves as a way to bring everything together and to memorialize the life of their loved one. It is a chance for everyone to see everyone else's loved one and also serves as a way to properly say good bye to their loved one, something they may have never had the chance to do. Having a candle lighting ceremony with their family members and those they had interacted with during camp is a way to reinforce the support that the children have.

Both males and females would be invited to the camps, aiming at children aged 10-17. It is essential to gain consent from the campers and their caregivers in order to attend the camps. All children who have experienced the death of a loved one, regardless of the relationship, are invited to attend camp. What follows below is a weekly outline of the grief camp activities (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
3:00pm- 3:30pm	Arrive, snack	Arrive, snack	Arrive, snack	Arrive, snack	Arrive, snack
3:30pm- 4:00pm	Icebreaker, rules, introductions	Team building activity	Guest speaker/outside presenter	Team building activity	Grief Activity
4:00pm- 5:00pm	grief activity	Recreational activity	grief activity	Recreational activity	Debrief, summarize week
5:00pm- 6:00pm	Recreational activity	Grief activity	Recreational activity	Grief activity	Dinner (family invited)
6:00pm- 6:30pm	Debrief, clean up, prepare to leave	Debrief, clean up, prepare to leave	Debrief, clean up, prepare to leave	Debrief, clean up, prepare to leave	Closing ceremony, candle lighting memorial
6:30pm- 7:15pm	Dinner (family invited)	Dinner (family invited)	Dinner (family invited)	Dinner (family invited)	Say goodbye and go home
7:15pm	go home	go home	go home	go home	

Figure 1: Grief Camp Schedule

The goal of this paper is to reveal the need for grief support in South Africa and to provide education about grief camps. It is imperative that more research and exploration be completed in order to successfully implement a grief camp in South Africa. Other areas that could be explored include safety, travel, the language, and professionals in South Africa.

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